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Edu-crafting posthumanist adventures in/for higher education: A speculative musing

PRE-PUBLICATION ACCEPTED VERSION

Abstract

This article muses on the contours of a posthuman imaginary for higher education. Divided into two parts, the first part considers patchiness as a potentially sustaining mode for posthuman pedagogies. The second ponders the question: what happens if? in relation to four different aspects of higher education and muses on how they may be reconfigured by posthumanism. The theory-practice of edu-crafting is elaborated to locate the musings in practical materializations which recast questions about who and what matters in higher education.

Keywords

Posthumanism, new materialism, higher education, edu-crafting, Anna Tsing, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway

Intro/Outro

This final article, in a formal sense the ‘outro’ to this *Parallax* special issue devoted to *Posthuman Pedagogies: Reconceptualising Higher Education*, muses on the contours of a posthuman imaginary for higher education. Its first part considers the promise of posthumanism in/for higher education and suggests that the concept of ‘patchiness’ offers a sustaining and sustainable mode for higher education. The second part asks ‘what happens if?’ to muse on how posthumanism reconfigures some key dimensions of higher education pedagogy and indicates how, via the theory-practice of edu-crafting, these musings might be put to work in pedagogic materializations. Together, the two parts suggest opportunities for practice/ing higher education pedagogy differently.

Part 1

Sustaining the patchiness

The past few years have seen posthumanism gain traction in arts, humanities and social sciences and, while it had an earlier take up in studies of early years, childhood education and schooling,¹ recent years have seen the pace picking up in terms of studies of higher education.² This emergent body of work is theoretically rich in its integration of diverse posthumanist currents (ANT, object oriented ontology, new material feminism, thing-power, affect, animal studies, critical posthumanities to name only a few) and is oriented to recasting some of the central concerns in contemporary higher education ('enhancing' student engagement, improving 'quality' teaching, de/colonizing curricula, generating research with 'impact') from the vantage of a posthuman stance. While not wishing to downplay the divergent currents of this emergent field, certain moves resonate across this work. These include: the questioning of human exceptionalism which pushes to the side the notion that 'nature' is separate from the 'human' and is therefore infinitely available for human 'use'; the grounding of this view in the scientific concept of objectivity – an apparent view from nowhere that turned out to be a very specific view from somewhere, that of white, western man; a desire for more inclusive human-nonhuman ethical and environmentally sustainable and modes of justice; a shift from individualized agency to ecologies, assemblages and shared worlds; a move away from binaries and dualisms towards multiplicity, complexity and emergence; and an imaginative engagement with thinking higher education pedagogy otherwise than in the measurement and metrics discourses of outcomes, KPIs and input-output. Taken together, these moves tend toward the reimagining of higher education as, in Barad (2007) terms, an entangled, co-constitutive *ethico-onto-epistemological* practice of (being and doing) world-ing.³

In what follows, I muse on the contours of a posthuman imaginary for higher education. This musing is a hybrid 'affirmative critique' grounded in: Braidotti's post-anthropocentric and ecologically relational view of human subjectivity;⁴ Latour's idea that critique needs to be oriented towards toward the gathering, the multiplication, towards 'matters of concern' rather than the deconstruction of matters of fact;⁵ Haraway's stance that being 'truly present' is a moral imperative, entwined as we are 'in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings';⁶ and Colebrook's view that we have to develop a non-catastrophic conceptualisation of time beyond linear versus non-linear temporalities.⁷ As I see it, a musing affirmative

critique is an opportunity to think beyond and outside dominant representations of higher education as a contemporary time-space damaged beyond repair by neoliberalism, and of HE learning and teaching as irremediably deformed by the marketisation, hierarchization and competition neoliberalism has ushered in. The musing I propose is open, speculative, practical and ethical. It is motivated by a sense that posthumanist approaches can: (a) help renew the ethical-political-joyful promise of higher education; (b) generate experimental ways of doing higher education pedagogy; and (c) recast questions about what universities are for.

However, I do not at all wish to suggest that a posthumanist higher education is a happy-clappy phenomenon: it is neither a wholesale reversal of what has gone on previously nor an installation of some indubitably new 'new'. It is, instead, a mixed and patchy phenomenon in which new-old (theories, narratives, practices) jostle in entangled matterings which may, just may, be generative of more response-able ways of knowing about 'our' place in (relation-with) the world. In this I follow Anna Tsing who proposes 'patchiness' as a potentially productive engagement with the precarious challenges of living and dying together in human-nonhuman configurations shaped by capitalist conditions which seem, at time, voraciously inimical to any form of non-monetised flourishing. While 'patchiness' brings to the fore humans' enmeshment in 'a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life', 'precarity' figures as an 'earthwide' condition but one that is experienced differently according to gender, race, class, dis/ability, age, geography.⁸ Thinking posthuman pedagogy via patchiness and precarity is, then, about attending to higher education as differentially distributed in terms of access and participation, alongside and with thinking higher education as differentially located and embedded in terms of programme, course or module, alongside and with reconceptualising higher education as not merely a human affair.

Thinking-with patchiness, in alliance with an ethico-onto-epistemological understanding of higher education, shifts classic sociological distinctions of agency and structure, of scale and significance. What emerges in the in-between space-time of macro-micro, body-mind, knowing-being-doing is the happenstance of the now and the emergent possibilities of the not-yet: dense material moments,⁹ bodily felt and affectively experienced, which offer possibilities for creatively un/doing sameness in HE pedagogy and for releasing novel learning, teaching and research rhythms.

Manning and Massumi talk about how the ‘commotional complexity of the moment in gyration’ intensifies relational potential.¹⁰ Edu-crafting HE pedagogy and research as adventures in the intensification of relational potential is, then, to reconceptualise higher education as a transversal practice of mattering, a practice which, on the one hand, is undergirded by an appeal to *zoe*, to life,¹¹ in which the vibrant capacity for flourishing is opened and, on the other, offers participants ‘arenas in which to gather’¹², arenas constituted by porous membranes so that any ‘we’ which emerges has expansive potential to include all manner of in/non/human life. Perhaps, in speculative mode, such a posthuman pedagogy can put higher education into freefall.

If this sounds bold and perhaps unrealisable in current performative HE contexts, it is worth remembering Barad’s words: that even the smallest cuts matter, that every intra-action matters, that all living is meeting and that each meeting matters.¹³ This mattering – or rather, the materialization of practices of mattering – takes place, as I indicated above, in the entangled, mixed, patchy and precarious ethico-onto-epistemological space of the here-and-now. That such here-and-now moments are fragile, transient and in need of care-full nurturing is true; that such moments may create trouble worth staying with is also true;¹⁴ that such moments create larger possibilities of/for affirmative, generative and response-able higher education pedagogy and research is also true. Edu-crafting posthuman adventures are, in my view, about trying to sustain the patchiness, so that patchiness itself becomes more sustainable as well as sustaining as we stay with the trouble of trying to counter the stultifying sedimentations that neoliberal anthropocentric higher education occasion. How to do this? Like Tsing I suggest that ‘our first step is to bring back curiosity. Unencumbered by the simplifications of progress narratives, the knots and pulses of patchiness are there to explore.’¹⁵ The question then becomes: what happens if?

Part 2

Edu-crafting an activism of small interventions

The question ‘what happens if?’ works as an acknowledgement that every posthuman doing is an experiment, something that we don’t already have a map, template or pre-formed schedule for. The practice of edu-crafting segues into this experimental space.

‘Edu-crafting’ describes cheap, low tech, and everyday experiments of entangled doing, being and thinking.¹⁶ The word edu-crafting joins creative activist work¹⁷, which uses craft interventions – such as sewing small banners about social justice issues and tying them to lampposts in public places, or tying Barbie dolls dressed as superman to bins – with ‘new’ material feminist/ posthuman research practices, and relating these to higher education. Edu-crafting is an activism of small interventions – or, thinking with Barad, of *intra-ventions* – which someone may see, be affected and touched by. Edu-crafting is about things happening on the wing, tuning into here-ness, now-ness and this-ness, and creating an ethico-onto-epistemological space for the ‘moving together and coming together of bodies’ to create the potential for ‘relational flips’ to occur. Such flips, Massumi argues, are important in that they produce interference and ‘tweak the resonation patterns between individuals’, so that the coming together of bodies works as an affective and ‘pragmatic politics of the in-between.’¹⁸ In its quiet activism, edu-crafting might even become a performative practice of minor civil/educational disobedience, one which tries to negotiate a (wavy) line between the unforeseen, temporary, unpredictable and contingent in the enactment/experience of pedagogy and pedagogy’s striated, institutional manifestations.

Edu-crafting posthumanist pedagogy in the emergent now partakes of Manning and Massumi’s notion of structured improvisations: they are ‘structured in the sense of being tailored to the singularity of this event, and improvised, taking the desires and expertise of the events particular participants into account’¹⁹ Elsewhere, I called edu-crafting the ‘practice of the plunge: letting go, diving, freefall, surfing ... swimming, waving and drowning.’²⁰ Plunging is about letting go: sometimes you feel free and energized; sometimes you get water up your nose and splutter; sometimes it is ungainly, other times exhilarating. Who knows what might happen.

I now turn to three different aspects of higher education pedagogy and muse briefly on ‘what happens if’ they are reconfigured by posthumanism. The discussion makes reference to an undergraduate module, *Educational Spaces: Theories and Perspectives*, on a BA Education Studies degree in a UK university, to ground these musings in pedagogic practice. The module requires students to produce an autoethnographic webjournal article in which two key critical incidents in their

learning journeys are analyzed via theoretical concepts on physical, material, cultural, social, global and virtual spaces of education.

1. What happens if ... we un/discipline curriculum knowledge?

One of the hallmarks of the development of universities has been the arrangement of knowledge into autonomous subjects and disciplines, each with their own integrity and distinctiveness. Disciplines have been regarded as the location of ‘powerful knowledge,’²¹ entry to them has been regulated via processes of acculturation and credentialism and, once entry has been gained (or granted), then one’s academic identity is shaped in accordance with the norms of that particular ‘tribe’ and the ‘territory’ it inhabits.²² There have been some recent shifts away from understandings which see disciplines as stable entities, unchanging in their contents and practices over significant periods of time, and towards a more contextual and contingent view which sees disciplines as having more porous boundaries. Edu-crafting seeks to push interdisciplinarity further – for example, *Educational Spaces: Theories and Perspectives* requires students to work between human geography, spatial theory, feminist theory, education, sociology, material culture studies, architecture and design, and weave these into an analytical autoethnography.

This is a tough call for undergraduates: it requires them to do some profound trans- and post-disciplinary critical thinking in working out how to navigate and make meaning from very different disciplinary resources, and to write in a very different style and mode to the 4000-word assignment format their degree studies have so far accustomed them to. Students often express a profound sense of dis/comfort in being unhoused from ‘their’ field of education and the four education disciplines normally utilized: history, psychology, philosophy, sociology. Students’ initial sense of ‘un-inhabiting’ comes across quite viscerally when, led by curiosity, they are exposed both to ‘making a cut’ across and through disciplines and to becoming entangled with disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, as students engage in knowledge-making as a ‘particular material articulation of the world,’²³ rather than as an understanding ‘of’ some ‘thing’, then pathways open up which ‘flip’ undergraduate education towards more nomadic, intra-active and post-disciplinary knowledge encounters.

2. What happens if ... we undo theory/practice and human/nonhuman binaries?

To supplement this destabilizing of disciplines, the module also diffracts autoethnography as an experimental form of knowledge production. Autoethnography might appear to be a humanist mode *par excellence* in that it is about reflexively researching and writing the ‘vulnerable self, emotions, body and spirit’.²⁴ Students use evocative and creative modes of making and storytelling to produce original texts and artefacts such as poems, mood board, narratives, vignettes and photo-stories. Considered as social and material enactments, these autoethnographic doings encourage students towards thinking diffractively in Barad’s (2007) sense of reading theoretical resources through each other – so here, their autoethnographic accounts of critical incidents are read diffractively through both theories of space and place and through humanist autoethnographic modes of writing. Working with theory diffractively, then, makes a shift from an orthodox notion that theory is something that is ‘applied’, to a view of theory as a joyously messy process of differential patterns of matterings, all of which are contingent, situated, embodied and affective. In this process theory becomes fluid, in a similar way that Koro-Ljungberg speaks of ‘fluid methodology’ as a mode of apprehending the energetic transformation of systemic relations.²⁵

In *Educational Spaces: Theories and Perspectives*, when theory becomes sticky and viscous – impossible to dis/entangle from practice – students find themselves grappling with the idea that in (most) ‘authorized’ versions of theory the personal, the local, the particular and the concrete are of no account. They come to see what passes as ‘canonical’ knowledge as existing in an uneasy relationship to ‘truth’ which is both mutable and contestable; they see knowledge enacted in traditional curricula and taught in ‘delivery’ mode as a production of the powerful; and encounterings with feminist and de/colonializing curriculum work further undo the ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’ of normative business-as-usual higher education curricula.

But flips required to create heterogeneous knowledge pathways call for teacher encouragement and student courage. When, for example, in the higher education

curriculum is it 'okay' for students to write about their affective engagements with their study table, their care for the material things on the table, and their imaginative appraisal of the complex, heterogeneous micro-practices of the multiple spaces they inhabit and work in as students? Who 'borrows' whose favourite mug? Who takes out the bins in shared student accommodation? Who cleans the kitchen and who doesn't? These are gendered, raced, ableist, ageist and classed everyday practices of mattering normally left out of official accounts of higher education. Once theory/practice binaries flip, then routes to other flips are more easily created. For example, students author theory-practice auto/ethnographies telling of their entangled lives with loved dogs, guinea pigs, and cats, of hedgehogs, birds, and foxes, and so partake in undoing humanist educational modes by including the agency of nonhuman animals, along with the thing power of objects in their study rooms: a family photo of a cousin's graduation day; a grandmother's wooden box; a pair of slippers; a door wedge.

Diffraction autoethnography may seem a minor jarring out of humanist frame but in this module it offers a possibility to attend to a more-than-human world, to tune into a more flattened ontology of non-individualized, co-constitutive being, and to question a whole array of humanist binaries: body/mind, body/brain, self/other, emotion/reason, woman/man. As a result, the higher education gravitational field pulses just a little differently. Including multiplicities and differences usually positioned 'outside' normalized modes of academic writing and assessment is not revolutionary but it is, I believe, important. Edu-crafting here is posed as a minor gesture which generates a small push towards divergent ways of posthuman knowing-doing in order to materialize undergraduate higher education differently.²⁶

3. What happens if ... we recast higher education learning, teaching and research as slow scholarship?

Donna Haraway's proposes the theory-practice of speculative feminism as a 'mode of attention ... and a practice of worlding' which involves thinking-with and thinking-between in a mode of 'creative uncertainty' in order to develop different and more collective modes of being, knowing and doing. Such a speculative feminism is critical-analytical in that it supports 'thinking beyond inherited categories and

capacities'; it is ethically responsible and responsive; it is empirically and practically grounded in the 'homely and concrete;' and, crucially, it is about 'staying with the trouble' that feminist politics provokes.²⁷ The edu-crafting I propose takes off from the question: What happens if the speculative feminism Haraway suggests is put in alliance with posthumanist-inflected possibilities for learning, teaching and research in higher education?

Perhaps what might happen is that we can make a decisive move beyond what Boyer called the 'tired old teaching versus research debate' in order to find more creative ways of being a scholar.²⁸ In this, Leibowitz and Bozalek's work offers important clues. Slow, they aver, has nothing to do with clock-time and everything to do with 'attentiveness, deliberation, thoughtfulness, open-ended inquiry, a receptive attitude, care-fullness, creativity, intensity, discernment, cultivating pleasure, and creating dialogues between the natural and social sciences.'²⁹ Such slowness focuses on matters of concern, on the quality of engagement, on ethical relationality, and might therefore create scope for a pedagogic work of sympoietic com-posting that Haraway considers is necessary for making kin across borders of species, nation, gender, race and class etc that humanism has so devastatingly instituted.

If so, the 'nature' of research flips. There can be no 'objects' that we 'subject to' our (human) observation, judgement, and reason, holding these objects off at arm's length. Posthumanist research, as an embedded and embodied materialist and experimental emergence which is immanent, contingent and conditional, deconstructs the fundamental assumptions underpinning dominant ways of producing knowledge. All research is an 'adventure[...] into the methodological unknown'; all research is research-creation.³⁰

If so, the 'nature' of teaching flips. The sensory, affective and material alongside and with the cognitive and intellectual become tangled into the content taught and the process of teaching (see above) such that distangling them is non/sense; the scientific status of 'reason/ableness' is problematized; the pedagogue as 'expert' is shunted aside in favour of learning-with and alongside, so that the complex challenges of power that come with status, role and knowledge are not wished away but are interrogated, brought to the fore and mulled over.

If so, the nature of learning flips. Learning as a transmission belt of inputs-outputs liable solely for assessment, measurement and certification, or as a product which will guarantee employability, is downgraded in favour of learning as an invitation to a slow pondering – of allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise and wonder.³¹ Learning gears into the perturbing here-and-now, to dwelling, and to staying-with (all sorts of) trouble.

Edu-crafting higher education, then, as an ethico-onto-epistemological learning-research-teaching entanglement – as a choreography of and for, in Haraway's terms, compos(t)ing and re/de/compos(t)ing – could involve activities such as:

Walking-learning-in-slippers

Higher education pedagogy normally requires students to sit at tables, usually still, usually reasonably quietly, and to produce themselves as docile bodies available for instruction. Walking as an embodied practice shifts this: it puts bodies in motion literally and gets thought moving in new ways. In *Educational Spaces: Theories and Perspectives* the students and I materialize the *dérive*, a spatial practice of strolling formulated by Debord in 1955 as a playful and political technique of psycho-geography. While Debord was writing in a Humanist frame, I'm interested in what the *dérive* offers as a new materialist technique which activates pedagogy as a material, spatial and affective encounter. Students and I bring our slippers in, exchange our shoes for slippers, go for a wander and take a photo of a place we find ourselves in. We ponder the materiality of chosen places, tune into their 'feeling', thinking along with smell, sights, sounds, the air and the atmosphere of the building. Walking-with theory-practice via sensory attunements of noticing. Edu-crafting pedagogy by touching the ground with your feet and by sensing and moving through air, so that air becomes embodied as research 'data'. Walking-with pedagogy, then, occasions shifts and escapes through a minor pedagogic flip.

Thinking-doing-researching-with-Lego

A colleague and I and a new cohort of doctoral students experiment with Lego. The task was to make Lego models of something/ anything in their/our doctoral journeys

in relation to moments of happiness. We wanted to pick at/ try to undo the measurement discourse of ‘student satisfaction’ by focusing instead on happiness. The purpose was to create a space where hands, doings, voices and materials could take over. We made recordings of table talk and we also recorded the feedback session, and students were invited to photograph their object/ artefact and email the photo to us (we had obtained institutional ethical approval and student consent). This as a sort of materialist, embodied research methodology creates a space for play which released some profound insights. It was also an occasion for students to see us as teachers-researchers – and collaborate with us – in doing non-traditional research/pedagogy as a gentle means to open up what non-normative research might entail.

4. What happens if ... we un/re/thought what higher education is/for?

5.

The question. ‘what is higher education for?’ riffs on Stephan Collini’s question from a few years ago: ‘what are universities for?’³² but perhaps already there is a problem with the very formulation of the question. If, as I suggest above, higher education is a multiple assemblage of interdependent co-constitutive human-nonhuman entanglements, and if edu-crafting is a slow scholarship of attunement, a minor pedagogy geared to the release and enhancement of curiosity, then perhaps to posit what higher education is ‘for’ is already to situate it within a linear tram track of input-output, within a discourse of ‘results’, which deform and skew its ‘nomadic’ potential. Instead of asking what higher education is ‘for’, how about thinking of what it might ‘do’, of its generative potential to plunge you-me-us-together into open-ended, immanent confrontation with knowledge/ing as discovery, creation and production. Edu-crafting slow learning-research-teaching as an onto-ethico-epistemological engagement might then help materialize higher education as a flip into an affirmative, affective and political sense of response-ability with the world-in-the-making. The promise of edu-crafting is, as I see it, a means to create a bit of blustery space for playful pedagogic practice-ings which, in their unfolding rhythms, might help us attend to what Haraway spoke of as the ‘more modest possibility of partial recuperation and getting on together. Call that staying with the trouble.’³³ The articles in this special issue encourage us to do just that in a whole manner of different ways.

¹ See respectively Osgood and Giugni (2015), Pacini-Ketchabaw, Taylor and Blaise (2016), the Common Worlds Research Collective <http://commonworlds.net>, and Gannon (2016).

² Bayley (2018), Bozalek and Zembylas (2016), Gourley (2015, 2012); McPhie (2016), Quinn (2016), Taylor and Harris-Evans (2016); Taylor and Gannon (2018) Taylor (2016).

³ Barad's (2007) concept of 'ethico-onto-epistemology' refers to our entangled materiality as a mode of knowing-in-being in the world which makes us accountable and response-able. According to Barad says, we know because we are *of* the world, not because we are *in* the world, 'knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part' (185).

⁴ Braidotti's (2013, 48) affirmative critique elaborates 'alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject' than that proposed either by historical Humanism with its premises of progress, reason and scientific rationality, or anti-humanism and 'the crisis of Man'; it is post-anthropocentric, cosmopolitan, post-colonial, relational, subaltern, secular, hybrid and ecological, and is grounded in 'an enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others, including the non-human or "earth" others.'

⁵ Latour (2004), 231.

⁶ Haraway (2016), 1.

⁷ Colebrook (2017).

⁸ Tsing (2015) 4 – 5.

⁹ I have elsewhere defined material moments as 'instances, occurrences and interactions which inhere in, and are enacted through, the materiality of bodily relations; they are moments which are materially dense and specific ... time-bound and spatially-located' (Taylor, 2018, 157). In this current paper I am most interested in the relationality of material moments.

¹⁰ Manning and Massumi (2014), 13.

¹¹ Braidotti (2013).

¹² Latour (2004), 246.

¹³ Barad (2007), 185, 385.

¹⁴ Haraway (2016) speaks of staying with the trouble as a serious and lively ethical practice of making oddkin – of the necessity of becoming-with – in unexpected collaborations and combinations outside the confines of hope and despair, in recognition of the difficulty of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth.

¹⁵ Tsing (2015), 6

¹⁶ The word 'edu-crafting' is a neologism I made up in my chapter 'Edu-crafting a cacophonous ecology', in *Posthumanist Research Practices in Education*. see Taylor and Hughes (2016).

¹⁷ See Sarah Corbett and the Craftivist Collective www.craftivist-collective.com

¹⁸ Massumi (2015), 17 – 18.

¹⁹ Manning and Massumi (2014), 92.

²⁰ Taylor (2016), 20.

²¹ Young and Muller (2013).

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- ²² Becher and Trowler (2001).
- ²³ Barad (2007), 139.
- ²⁴ Reed-Danahay, cited in Muncey (2010), 30.
- ²⁵ Koro-Lungberg (2016), 90.
- ²⁶ Manning (2016, 1) defines the minor gesture as ‘a force that courses through [major hegemonic striations or dominant structures] unmooring its structural integrity, problematizing its normative standards.’
- ²⁷ Haraway (2016), 213, 34, 7.
- ²⁸ Boyer, cited in Leibowitz and Bozalek (2018).
- ²⁹ Leibowitz and Bozalek (2018)
- ³⁰ Taylor (2017), Manning and Massumi (2014).
- ³¹ Barad (2012), 207.
- ³² Collini (2012).
- ³³ Haraway (2016), 10.

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